



Department
for Education

Evaluation of Regional Adoption Agencies: adopter recruitment

Research brief

June 2021

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Social Research

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1. Introduction

This research brief is informed by Ecorys' and the Rees Centre's research between 2018 and early 2020, as part of their evaluation of RAAs¹ and provides a summary of the evidence on adopter recruitment in the transition from local adoption services to Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs). The evaluation involved: baseline visits to live RAAs in early 2018, followed by two waves of in-depth case study research with six RAAs in Autumn 2018 and Autumn/Winter 2019 and 2020; a survey of prospective adopters attending preparation groups in five RAAs; and interviews with further RAAs and stakeholders.

This brief draws on evidence from this research and relevant previous research, and covers three key areas:

1. Developing a strategic approach to marketing
2. Increasing the size of the adoptive parent pool
3. Improving the training provided in preparation groups.

Some of the ideas reported as part of the evaluation may not be particularly innovative, but the case study research found they were very important, with adopter recruitment being strengthened when these aspects were in place.

¹ All reports from the evaluation of Regional Adoption Agencies can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-regional-adoption-agencies>

2. Developing a strategic approach to marketing

The Centre for Research on Children and Families (CRFC) research on success factors in adopter recruitment highlighted that marketing should be integral to the agency strategy.² Our research identified that RAAs have refined and implemented their own marketing and recruitment strategies, developing a more strategic approach to recruiting adopters.

This approach has involved:

- Pooling resources and creating economies of scale through centralised marketing programmes.
- Establishing dedicated marketing teams and/or leads, which has brought a concentration of expertise. RAAs valued this expertise and the skills and enthusiasm that marketing personnel bring.
- Extending the reach of recruitment to a more diverse audience through targeted marketing strategies, such as:
- Outreach work: Making connections with local services and organisations, such as churches and Gay Pride events. RAAs found that having practitioners in local communities engages local people in the conversation around adoption.
- Representing diversity in campaigns: Including diverse groups within their marketing and recruitment resources. This is to promote the understanding that adoption is open for all, and to change negative adoption narratives that adoption is only available for some types of families. Examples include single parent, diverse ethnic groups, and LGBTQ+ couples sharing their adoption stories, which have then been used on RAA websites and within promotional resources.
- Supplementing national campaigns: The CRFC research³ also highlighted the importance of the adoption agency's website and online presence in recruitment. Longer established RAAs have continued to develop engaging RAA websites, placing more emphasis on the quality of information provided on the website (see 'The importance of the website' example below). The research with prospective adopters and RAAs found that it is important that prospective adopters feel welcomed; this includes seeing examples of adopters from their own communities on the website.
- Developing engaging website content: Some RAAs engaged staff (at all levels) in designing and developing aspects of the RAA to create opportunities for dialogue. They held consultations, staff workshops, and developed 'task and finish' groups.

² J., Clifton, & E., Neil (2013). Success factors in adopter recruitment: Insights from adoption agency social work managers and marketing officer.

³ Kindred (2014). Identifying effective marketing methods to engage potential adopters. DfE. Available at: <https://www.first4adoption.org.uk/professionals/national-recruitment-forum/identifying-effective-marketing-methods-to-engage-potential-adopters/>

It was important to engage local authority children's social workers and senior leaders in this process alongside RAA staff.

- Using alternative media to engage the audience: One example was from an RAA that had started to use methods such as podcasts: an inexpensive marketing tool to deliver key information about upcoming events and workshops. Podcasts are also a means of exploring important themes such as adopting children with complex needs.
- Engagement with the local authorities: The research suggests that local authority (LA) communications teams play a supportive role in RAAs' marketing efforts. Local authorities can increase the reach of resources through retweeting and sharing newsletters. RAAs have also been able to draw on local authority resources to maximise the audience of their marketing, for example one RAA was able to advertise on a local authority's big screens across the city.
- Recognising the importance of word-of mouth: The research found that word-of-mouth continues to be a powerful tool for RAAs seeking to recruit adopters. Therefore, a successful marketing approach needs to have an impact and promote conversation. This point also links to the quality of the service that adoptive families receive, as personal recommendations are crucial for recruitment.

There were challenges:

- Several RAAs expressed concerns that there had been a lack of engagement from LAs. In some cases, LAs' support for the RAAs' marketing approaches peaked around the time of the national campaign. The most helpful LA communications teams continuously retweeted RAA material, but one interviewee reported that the activity fell off after National Adoption Week. Maintaining momentum is important as prospective adopters can take weeks or months before deciding to act.
- Tailoring the national campaign to reflect the local communities and ensuring that advertising reaches prospective adopters. For example, national campaigns were published in the Guardian newspaper. One RAA felt this was not the right media outlet to reach their local demographics that would meet the needs of their waiting children.
- Understanding the direct impact of the marketing strategies upon enquiries from potential adopters. The research found only limited examples of RAAs tracking the success of marketing strategies. Even where enquiries were increasing, interviewees were unsure whether the increase was as a direct result of their marketing activities.

Case study – Partnership with a local Football Association (FA)

As part of their marketing strategy, one RAA has partnered with their local Football Association. They recognise the importance of being visible in a family atmosphere that can attract over 10,000 people to the games. The local FA has named a pitch, ball, and cup after the RAA and their advertisements appear around the newly built pitch. The RAA has also been able to utilise the local FA's other partners to secure further marketing

opportunities. For example, the FA has a partnership with a large hotel chain; the RAA has been able to use the hotel to run large scale events at a discounted rate.

“It’s opened up a few doors and it’s definitely something we want to home in on.”
(Case study RAA social worker)

Case study – The importance of the website

As highlighted in Identifying effective marketing methods to engage potential adopters⁴, ‘fact-finding and research’ was identified as one of the six key phases of the adoption journey. The research found that during this stage, potential adopters were reliant on web-based information. Our research shows that the quality and information provided on the website were important to adopters, as was being made to feel welcome. This included seeing examples of adopters from their own communities.

“Their website just looked quite good, they seemed quite forward-thinking. They had a lot about single adopters, or same-sex couple adopters, or older adopters and so they came across as being quite progressive.” (Prospective adopter)

Issues arising from the research:

- How is data collected around how prospective adopters first learn about the RAA?
- How is analytical data on website use gathered and utilised? This may include data such as the number of unique visitors or the most frequently visited pages.
- How are target audiences engaged with marketing? Is this active (e.g., stalls at events such as Gay Pride where representatives of the RAA are present) or passive (e.g., billboard advertisements), and how is information collected on which works best?
- Do marketing resources represent the diversity of the prospective adopters that need to be recruited?
- What medium of marketing is the most cost effective in terms of reach? How is this actively monitored and how can this information be used to support future planning?
- Does the type of marketing affect the number of prospective adopters who will go on to register interest?

⁴ Ibid

3. Increasing the size of the adopter pool

The research found that RAAs thought they have successfully broadened the adopters they can place children within number, and to a lesser extent, diversity. This is as a result of regionalisation and pooling adopters. However, challenges in recruiting adopters for 'harder to place' children and national diversity issues remain in some respects. RAAs including some of the more established RAAs (2+ years) reported a continuing lack of ethnic diversity amongst prospective adopters, particularly those of Black African/ Caribbean heritage. Although in some regions, interviewees considered the lack of ethnic diversity to be reflective of the demography of the local community.

The case studies provided some innovative examples of RAA approaches to recruiting adopters, including:

- Changing the narrative: The national adoption campaign aims to shift the narrative that only a certain 'type' of person or family unit can adopt, supporting the message that adoption is open to all. The RAAs interviewed share this vision and are focusing on considering adopters on an individual basis, having worked to reduce the perceived barriers faced by prospective adopters (for example around length of time since last IVF cycle or those who do not own their home).
- Considering all routes to early permanence at an earlier stage: This is supported by improvements to ways of working with LAs, such as early notification systems. For the case study RAAs, regionalisation has increased resources to have a dedicated family finder to support early permanence processes – this includes attendance at the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) and legal gateway meetings.
- Considering the adopter's experience of the service from the initial enquiry and throughout. Our research suggests that first interactions with the service are an important part of the adoption journey – see the Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) example below. The research also highlights the importance of considering how groups such as those from ethnic minorities and LGBTQ+ could feel like they will be treated differently by the RAA and working to remedy this.
- Innovative approaches to matching may broaden the standpoint of prospective adopters on the type of child they are considering for adoption. This may better match the needs of waiting children such as older children, children from ethnic minorities and sibling groups. The research found that approaches that allow the prospective adopters to meet the children, either in person or digitally (see Adoption Picnic and information evening examples), can be effective.

There were, however, challenges:

- Striking the balance between opening up adoption and being mindful of approval rates: Whilst opening up adoption to a wider pool of prospective families is important, the research found that RAAs need to monitor conversion rates across a diverse range of adopters. This is to ensure a sufficient number of prospective adopters are recruited who best meet the needs of waiting children.

- There remains a national issue of recruiting families for harder to place children: Whilst innovative methods of recruitment and matching have made progress, the national challenge in recruiting families for children such as those within sibling groups, older children and those with complex needs remains, indicating that more innovation may be needed.
- Differences in local authority positions on key issues, for example re-housing overcrowded adoptive families: Our research found that some RAAs experienced challenges when different LAs within their regionalised model had differing criteria for re-housing adoptive families. This compounded efforts to open up adoption to a wider diversity of people. This is particularly relevant in areas with higher house prices, and thus smaller properties.

Case study – Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) accreditation

DDP is a therapeutic, parenting approach and a possible model for relationship-based practice. It uses what is known about attachment and developmental trauma to help children and families with their relationships. As part of gaining their DDP accreditation, one case study RAA has trained most staff members to DDP level 1. The DDP informed communication must begin right from the very first point of contact for families, and so RAAs also trained administration staff in the approach.

“Our business support officers have had the DDP training so when they pick up the phone to a distressed applicant... We had an assessor in last week and the adopters said they could see the difference in communication.” (Case study RAA manager)

Case study – A warm welcome

Our research found that prospective adopters have been through a process of reflection before deciding to make an enquiry to an agency. Therefore, RAA staff see the first interaction as important; they take care and make various arrangements to welcome enquirers warmly and listen to their questions and concerns.

“Deal with initial enquiries as a conversation rather than form filling exercise.”
(Case study RAA Marketing Manager)

“For me right from the recruitment stage phone call it’s about, ‘Let’s not have any barriers to adoption, let’s see everyone individually’.” (Case study RAA Head of Service)

Case study – Adoption Picnics

One case study RAA has set up adoption picnics, an activity day for prospective adopters and children. Held every other month, the initiative has brought success in placing sibling groups, older children, and those with complex needs.

“That has worked really well...Three of our older boys over 12 who have been waiting nearly three years for a family, and they did get families through the Adoption Picnic.” (Case study RAA social worker)

“It allows prospective adopters to see the real child. Because they would normally be given a profile, or a child permanence report, or something written, and you would see in that information about background, which might be a bit difficult. You might see things about the uncertainty of the child’s development, about potential for this to happen, for that to happen, and we always paint the worst-case scenario. You get to the picnic, and you are able to see the actual child. And we are still saying, ‘There is uncertainty with this child, this might be worst case scenario,’ what have you, but they’ve seen the child and they’ve been able to see what they can manage.” (Case study RAA social worker)

Case study – Information evenings

Information evenings have been used as an engaging way to deliver key information to prospective adopters early in the adoption journey. One RAA placed emphasis on the information evening, using presentations, images of the children and interactive delivery. Prospective adopters were therefore able to get a better sense of the child and help encourage matches with ‘harder to place’ children.

“...[A]nd then they come to an info evening which I run... I present it in a way which a person would engage with. Not the blue screen of death...do it more as a picture prompt exercise. One or two diagrams... jokes, to keep people interested, feeling relaxed, don’t sugar coat things...potential adopters say we come to you because you tell it how it is...others perhaps...explain that children come from very difficult backgrounds and people need to be prepared.” (Case study RAA Marketing Manager)

“Big photos help to make that connection. As do children’s profiles - make the child the focal point.” (Case study RAA Marketing Manager)

Issues arising from the research:

- How are conversion and approval rates monitored? How does this data inform recruitment?
- Are the past experiences of adopters with other agencies considered and how that may affect their perception of your service? How is this actively remedied from the front door?

- What innovative approaches are being taken in matching prospective families with harder to place children?
- What steps are taken to ensure that the families are making informed decisions before ruling out routes to adoption such as early permanence?

4. Delivering preparation group training

The safety, stability and long-term success of adoptive placements are strongly linked with adoptive parents' expectations of and preparation for adoption. Preparation groups aim to educate and prepare prospective adopters for the process and the realities of adoptive parenting. The training is intended to facilitate a process of self-reflection and self-assessment of strengths, limitations, and preferences, thereby helping prospective adopters develop realistic expectations of adoption. They are run by experienced adoption social workers (some are adoptive parents themselves), often with contributions from other adoptive parents, foster carers, and other professionals.

The programmes have an adoption-specific focus:

- Children's needs are viewed through the lens of the child's past experiences, loss, traumas, placements, and the environmental and biological context.
- The birth family circumstances are de-stigmatised to create empathy and an understanding of the role of contact.
- They include a description of the adoption process and the lifelong nature of adoption.

The groups also present an opportunity to meet other prospective adopters and develop peer support networks.

A survey was conducted by the Rees Centre to evaluate prospective adopters' experience of the preparation groups run by five RAAs over a 10-to-12-month period. The findings from the survey (n=471: 76% return rate) found an overall very positive response. Satisfaction with training was rated on average as 9 out of 10.

Participants thought their knowledge on the impacts of abuse, the adoption process, and adoptive family life all significantly increased after training. More than a quarter (26%) began the training having 'very little knowledge' of the effects of maltreatment on children, but after attending the training 94% felt more confident in their knowledge. The largest statistical effect was seen in knowledge surrounding contact with the birth family and the development of an adoptive identity. Prospective adopters also recorded a shift in their attitudes to openness in adoption.

Commitment is a key protective factor in adoptive placements and the training supported that factor: 76% of survey respondents felt more positive about their choice of adoption after the training, with commitment to adopting a child from care rising from 77% to 92%.

Prospective adopters were very satisfied with the preparation groups run by the RAAs involved in the evaluation.

The research found a number of factors that led to high satisfaction ratings:

- Varied methods of delivery: Adopters valued the mixture of presentations by knowledgeable skilled speakers, input from experienced adopters/foster carers, and small group experiential activities.
- Varied structure: Most prospective adopters really liked gaps between the training days to enable leave from work to be more easily arranged and to allow time to process the intensity of the experience. Some RAAs were also able to provide weekend courses for those unable to take time off work, but Saturday courses presented difficulties for those with young children. Prospective adopters preferred a range of course options.
- An upbeat, open, and safe environment: This was created by the trainers and enabled adopters to discuss difficult topics and ask questions without fear of judgement.
- Information that challenged preconceptions: Prospective adopters wrote about increased empathy and overcoming their 'fear' of the birth parents. They also thought information had challenged their beliefs on the heritability of mental illness and learning difficulties. There were particularly important changes in the knowledge and the attitudes of male partners; after the training they were more willing to consider birth family contact and reported an increased understanding of children's needs.
- Building in a clear overview of the availability of adoption support postplacement: The support offer was a key factor in the choice of an adoption agency and in prospective adopters' willingness to be more flexible in preferences.

Case study – Exercises and inputs prospective adopters particularly mentioned.

- DVDs and YouTube videos, especially the work of Dan Hughes, such as: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2nLF0wdoSJ0>
- DVDs of birth parents talking about their experiences.
- Ed Tronick's classic experiment 'The Still Face'.
- The film 'ReMoved' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOeQUwdAjE0>
- The BBC2 documentary 'Home for Maisie'.
- The use of 'real' life stories and case studies during training.
- Experiential exercise: Setting up the room as an adoption panel meeting and role playing, the String exercise on loss (see case study example below) and the Child's Wall.
- Making materials available during lunch times and breaks, such as children's profiles, Link Maker profiles, examples of child permanence reports, life story books and later life letters.

Case study – String exercise

One of the facilitators takes the role of the child and stands in the centre of the room. The prospective adopters stand in a circle around the child. The second facilitator gives the end of the string to the 'child' and then goes around the circle giving each adopter a role.

The roles include foster carer; foster carer's neighbour; foster carer's pet cat; foster carer's toys; school teacher; lollypop lady/man; dinner lady; best friend at school; teaching assistant at school; local park; Brownie leader; best friend at Brownies; church/mosque leader, person who serves the tea at church/mosque, social worker etc. The roles also include the birth family and the new adoptive parent.

With the 'child' holding onto the end of the string, the facilitator then takes the ball of string to each person playing a role and back to the child. The end result is that the child is in the centre of a wheel of string with two lines of string leading to each person playing a role.

Whilst giving out the roles the facilitator embellishes the story. For example, the story might start: "This is Chantelle. She is five years old. She has been in foster care for two years and had just started school. Her foster carer is great and loves her very much. She understands Chantelle and is very patient with her. The foster carer's neighbour is an elderly gentleman who always teases Chantelle when he throws the ball back to her from his garden. The foster carer's cat is called Lucky and he sleeps on Chantelle's bed. She loves that cat...." The facilitator tells the story ensuring all the roles are included in the narrative.

At the end of the story Chantelle is going to be adopted and the facilitator emphasises how excited Chantelle is about meeting her forever mummy/daddy.

The facilitator goes back to the start of the circle and explains that Chantelle will no longer see the foster carer in the same way anymore and snips one of the strings leading to the foster carer (Only snip one string as it is good practice to encourage appropriate ongoing contact with the foster carer). The facilitator explains that Chantelle probably will not see the elderly neighbour again, and so snips both strings leading to the elderly neighbour. In this way the facilitator goes around the circle snipping away the strings connecting the 'child' to the 'roles'. At the end, the child is left holding one string connecting her to the foster carer, one string connecting her to the birth parent, one string connecting her to the social worker and two strings connecting her to the new adoptive parent. She is also left holding all the ends of the snipped string.

The exercise symbolises loss. This is just one cycle of loss of a child leaving one foster carer. The facilitator emphasises that the child will have gone through a similar story when they left their birth family, and if they have had more than one foster home they will have gone through these experiences, perhaps many times.

Each adopter is left holding a piece of string. It is a stark reminder of the huge loss our children go through.

(Exercise and Animation created by a VAA)

<http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/research/regional-adoption-agencies-an-evaluation/>

Prospective adopters also highlighted challenges:

- Materials not provided in advance: Many prospective adopters were not supplied with copies of handouts, slides, and learning objectives in advance of the sessions.
- Training decisions could create delays: Delays in registrations and issues of timeliness occurred in some RAAs when training was only delivered in stage one or only delivered in stage two. Delivering across the stages enabled prospective adopters to join at different points in the process without having to wait.
- Mixing attendance of first and second-time adopters and foster carers: Some prospective adopters complained that second-time adopters or foster-carer adopters dominated sessions with their comments while second-time adopters felt that the training had not met their needs. One RAA was providing a separate session on 'Adding a child to your family' and these sessions could be more widely used. It has long been known that adding another child, without sufficient preparation, increases the risk of disruption (Ternay et al. 1985; Quinton et al. 1988; Selwyn, 2019).
- Weighting of the content: Prospective adopters valued the informative 'jam-packed' schedule, with long days of training covering a lot of content. However, some felt that they would have liked more information on topic areas including early permanence, adopting whilst having birth children and advice on adopting children with complex needs.
- Lengthy travel time: Prospective adopters in two RAAs felt that they were travelling further for preparation groups due to regionalisation. Most wanted the training location to be within 30 minutes driving time of their home and for parking to be freely and easily available.
- Accessibility of the venue and training content: It is important to consider the way the training room is set up and if prospective adopters have any additional needs when delivering training. Some prospective adopters complained that they could not hear the speakers or see the PowerPoint presentations.
- Challenging preconceptions: While many prospective adopters reported that their attitudes to the birth family had been challenged, there were indications that more could be done to challenge other negative attitudes. After training, 99% of prospective adopters were willing to accept a child who had been neglected and 85% a child whose mother had misused alcohol/drugs, but only 63% a child who had been sexually abused. While the impact of abuse is affected by many factors, the long-term detrimental effects of neglect are well documented as are the resilience of sexual abuse survivors. Prospective adopters also commented that there were

gaps in considering adopting a child of a different ethnicity or a child with a disability.

- Lack of prospective adopters from minority ethnic communities: Out of the 471 prospective adopters that completed the survey, only 42 (9%) described themselves as being from an ethnic minority (23 identified as Asian, 13 mixed ethnicity, 4 'other' and 2 identified themselves as Black). There remains much to be done to encourage minority ethnic individuals to consider adoption.

Preparation groups: Issues arising from the research

- The recruitment of prospective adopters from within faith based, LGBT and ethnic minority communities. Do people see themselves in the materials used in preparation groups and do speakers reflect diversity?
- Are the locations, dates, and time of the preparation groups flexible enough to meet the needs of the prospective adopters, considering individual factors, such as childcare and working hours?
- How could the development of peer networks and peer mentoring be better supported, especially if prospective adopters are travelling a distance?
- How accessible is the venue and the content for prospective adopters with additional needs such as hearing loss?
- Are the topics covered being given sufficient weighting? Does the content covered give sufficient weighting to parenting skills? Is there any input from behaviour management specialists?
- Is there an open environment within the preparation group, to allow for difficult topics to be approached and questions asked?
- How are the needs of second-time adopters met? How are their children prepared?
- Is there a balance between explaining the challenges of adoption parenting and the joy and love adoption can bring?

5. Support after preparation groups

Earlier research in the UK (e.g., Rushton & Monck)⁵ reported a high level of satisfaction by prospective adopters at the time the training ended. That finding was repeated in the Rees Centre survey responses quoted here. However, research from the UK and US (Rushton and Monck 2009; Lee et al 2018⁶) has also found that satisfaction levels drop once a child is placed. Adopters report that the broad training they received did not prepare them for the parenting challenges their child presented or gave them the skills to manage difficult behaviours (Selwyn et al 2014⁷). There is only so much that can be provided by the initial preparation group training and additional training and support will be needed once the needs of the child who is being placed are known.

The transition from foster care to adoptive family is a particularly vulnerable time for children but it presents opportunities to promote attachment and prevent problems from escalating. Therefore, early intervention should be part of support plans:

- Consider implementing the model developed at the University of East Anglia on 'Moving to Adoption'. (See <https://www.movingtoadoption.co.uk/>)
- Is there scope for additional short and targeted sessions at the time of the transition from foster care to the adoptive family? For example, adopting a child with foetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD) or with attachment difficulties or using the DfE-funded evidence based Enhancing Adoptive Parenting Programme⁸.

⁵ Rushton A and Monck E (2009) Adopters' experiences of preparation to parent children with serious difficulties. *Adoption and Fostering*, 33:2, 4-12

⁶ Op cit, Lee B., Kobulsky J., Brodzinsky D., & Barth R (2018) Parent perspectives on adoption preparation: Findings from the Modern Adoption Families project. *Children and Youth Services Review* 85, 68-71

⁷ Selwyn J., Wijedasa D., & Meakings S. (2014) *Beyond the Adoption Order*. Department for Education <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/beyond-the-adoption-order-challenges-intervention-disruption>

⁸ <https://corambaaf.org.uk/books/enhancing-adoptive-parenting-0>



Department
for Education

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Reference: DFE- RB1136

ISBN: 978-1-83870-267-0

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